

REFLECTION: IN-CLASS WRITING AND ONLINE CLASS DISCUSSION  
(thinking out loud about pedagogy and community building)

- “Start Writing” at the Start of Class
  - I have started all in-person class meetings with what I call Start Writing, most commonly a brief observations exercise that I had adapted from poet Marie Howe. In addition to the observations prompt, the Start Writing usually includes a content-based or metacognitive prompt related to the readings and written assignments due that class.
  - Start Writing: Observations Prompt
    - Write 5+ observations of the world around you today so far. The observations can be things you saw, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled. The observations can also be “actions of the mind”—things that you thought, remembered, felt, wondered, or asked. Use complete sentences.
  - Goals and rationale for doing this “creative” exercise in an English Composition class
    - Notice specific details upon active scrutiny. Articulate those details in a way that is accessible to someone who had not observed those details in person themselves.
    - Transfer our observation skills from outside of the classroom and from previous learning experiences, to the kinds of observations that we practice in this class: reading, critical thinking, analysis, communication, and metacognitive reflection.
    - More sarcastic justification: How can we expect to analyze a text if we can’t even recall the details of our own lived experience from just a few hours ago?
    - Put our theoretical model of the writing process into practice: Get in the habit of lowering our so-called *affective filter* and practice letting ourselves write what comes to mind—generate new writing versus revise versus edit. This awareness and skill can be transferred to their independent written coursework.
    - The Start Writing establishes a routine and sense of normalcy for our in-class academic community. For practical purposes in the classroom, the Start Writing gives me time to distribute the written assignments and Start Writing that had been due the previous class, to take attendance, and to give live tips for getting “unstuck” during the writing process.
    - The Start Writing gives visual confirmation and reassurance that we are an academic community of writers, thinkers, and learners. Given that I assign readings and scaffolded written assignments each class, students complete most of the coursework independently before class. In class, seeing and participating in a low-stakes, group writing activity helps affirm and sustain writer identity.

- “Start Writing” on Asynchronous Online Class Discussions
  - Structure of Discussion Questions
    1. Start Writing
    2. Concise sharing about today’s reading and writing
    3. Optional space for questions, thoughts, feelings, reflections
    4. Response to 3+ peers with 2+ sentences each
  - Goals and rationale for continuing this “creative” exercise via distance learning
    - The in-class routine of Start Writing can be transferred to an asynchronous online class discussion, and can facilitate its success. In the emergency transition from face-to-face instruction to distance learning during the ongoing global health, financial, and education crisis, the continued presence of our former in-class routine can help establish an online routine. Such a routine can create a more welcoming environment for various content-based and metacognitive reflections.
    - In designing online discussions for my courses, I am afraid that students will think of the new online group-discussion platform as higher stakes than I want it to be. In my class, spoken participation was not recorded with an electronic device, and any in-class writing was submitted only to the instructor. But on a Google Doc, even independent in-class writing is now more “visible” to the rest of the class, with a written record, and in a form superficially very similar to the low/medium/high stakes written assignments that students complete between each class meeting.
    - Given these potential concerns, I need to actively (re)establish class discussion as a creative space to think out loud and generate new writing in the moment. To this end, I implement the Start Writing as envisioned and outlined above for in-class instruction. I’ve also done some modeling in writing and with digital multimodal texts (a meme, photographs) to norm and reinforce such a tone.
  - Preliminary Reflections
    - Though online group discussion may take some students less time than commuting and attending class, more participation and student-to-student response may be happening than had happened in the classroom. (?) Most notably, students can now more easily participate in multiple small groups, they can read all writing and responses in the Google Doc, and they can interact directly with students who normally did not sit around them in the classroom (where I occasionally but not always assigned students across the room to work with each other in small groups). Moreover, based on our first Google Doc, many students who have demonstrated reluctance to participate out loud in class are now shining in this written mode.
    - For now, I keep going back and forth about whether I should prioritize quantity or quality in online discussion. What balance best accomplishes the learning outcomes for a course on critical thinking, communication, the writing process, and navigating various genres and digital multimodal texts? Could I more thoughtfully calibrate this for each class, based on how high-stakes or lengthy or time-intensive the corresponding written assignment was for that class?
    - I wonder what affective/logistical challenges my students and I would have encountered if we had begun the semester as an entirely online course. When we began distance learning, we weren’t starting an academic community from scratch. We had been in the same classroom for 13 class meetings x 1h15m.
    - What priorities are unique to this first transition, and which should I continue when designing any English Composition coursework for distance learning?

- In the instructions, I tell students that they do not need to respond to every single thing that their peers have written. Each response has to be 2+ sentences, and the response can relate in part to the observations.
  - Though I had initially designed and implemented the observations prompt with the rationales above for in-person instruction, I suspect that the observations are key to building and hopefully sustaining a sense of community this semester.
  - One student, for example: “Hi Ben / My name is Mahdiya / It sucks that your store is run out of chips but have you tried to go to the grocery and buy the variety pack?”
  - This response doesn't have to do with the content of the reading and writing assignments due that day. But arguably, such interactions are key for building and sustaining academic community. (If I dared to dramatize this: Oh, the people on here have a personality. They can respond to my own expression of the things I'm experiencing in the world around me. These are the people I was in a room with this whole time. These are the people I could turn to before, during, or after class and sometimes even joke around with and then analyze texts with and ask questions with.)
- I brought up many of these reflections in a WebEx meeting with Brooklyn College composition instructors, and soon after in a Zoom meeting with my City Tech First-Year Writing rhetoric/composition professional-development seminar. It was useful to express out loud and think out loud and try to make sense of this.
- I recently found an academic article with a Venn diagram about social presence, cognitive presence, and teacher presence for online discussions. But then my laptop crashed, and I forgot to go find it after getting my laptop running again. I think that article will help me focus my thoughts and think of the bigger picture.
- So much to say about a 10-minute writing exercise. Ridiculous or beautiful?